

IMPLEMENTING AN EXPANDED FOOD AND NUTRITION POLICY: IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY EDUCATION

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My intent is to relate today's program on nutrition policy issues to general policy education, and to provide some challenges to those working or contemplating working in nutrition policy education.

Today's program represents an issue that is of concern to people, is creating some tension, and is arousing anxiety among various interests. Boehm, our keynote speaker, identified a number of food and nutrition policy issues. Hegsted, a nutritionist, provided some perspectives for helping to establish some food-nutrition policy goals. Some of the concerns of implementing an expanded food-nutrition policy and some of the impacts on consumers, food manufacturers and processors, and farmers were provided by the representative panel.

A Historical Perspective

A major commitment of this conference has been to devise and improve public policy teaching methods on controversial subject matter, such as nutrition policy.

The approach used in today's program has been very useful in the past. It has provided individual policy educators the kind of information necessary to evaluate the importance of the issue, and, if appropriate, to start preparing materials and organizing resources for conducting public policy programs in their state.

A short review of educational materials and programs developed in the last two decades for nationwide use on farm and food policy related topics included:

1 "The Farm Problem—What Are the Choices?" published in 1960 provided an analysis of policy alternatives to help alleviate the farm price and income problems of commercial farmers. Major policy decisions and directions for commercial agriculture followed in the 60s and 70s.

2 "People and Income in Rural America—What Are the Choices?" published in 1967 separated policy alternatives for commercial agriculture from those of low income and small farmers. We are still concerned about policies and programs to assist small farmers, and a portion of this conference will be devoted to small farm issues.

3 "Who Will Control U.S. Agriculture?" was published in 1972 to assist people in analyzing various policies affecting the organizational structure of U.S. agriculture. The program helped stimulate research, encouraged changes in tax laws, and aroused interest in the economic organization of agriculture and control of the food system.

4 The "Your Food" program was directed toward societal concerns and alternatives about domestic and foreign food supplies, hunger, and food prices. The materials were published in 1975 and 1976. The major audiences of this program were consumers, though farm and agribusiness interests were well represented.

This brief historical review reveals a significant trend in the type and scope of issues addressed by public policy educators. We have progressed from conducting educational programs on alternative policies and programs for commercial agriculture to differentiating commercial farm policy alternatives from low income and small farm policies to the economic organization and structure of agriculture to food and farm policies. The consideration of food-nutrition policy is a natural progression or evolution in the issues facing society and, therefore, an issue facing policy educators.

A Program Proposal—Nutrition Policy Choices

During the conduct of the Your Food program it became apparent that nutrition policy issues were of major concern to people. Many were aware of the activities of the Senate Select Committee on Nutrition and their role in developing dietary goals. As a result of these Your Food and other interests the national steering committee for the Your Food project provided the opportunity for an ad hoc committee of nutritionists, home economics leaders, consumer economists, and agricultural economists to explore additional education thrusts in food policy that might be appropriate for Extension educators. The result was a proposal called "Nutrition Policy Choices."

The task is to develop a national Extension program and educational materials on nutrition policy choices for use with professionals and lay leaders. The proposed program would describe in detail (1) nutritional status of the U.S. population and linkages with other facets of the quality of life, (2) alternative policies to improve nutrition amongst the people in the U.S., and (3) assess some of the consequences of alternative policies upon the goals or values of consumers, producers, agribusinessmen, and others.

The program proposal is modeled after the "Your Food" and the "Who Will Control U.S. Agriculture?" programs. The proposal calls for the use of special need funds of the Science and Education Administration-USDA. The nutrition policy program proposal, in general, has been reviewed favorably by people within the USDA. It may need some amendments, if it is to be approved for 1978-79 funding.

Interdisciplinary Work

The "Your Food" program has provided a base to expand upon interdisciplinary Extension educational programs. For example, we know the state teaching teams in the Your Food program averaged 4.2 people per team. There were 15 disciplines represented in the teaching teams in the reporting states. The greatest number of people came from agricultural economics, home economics, and nutrition. Food science and consumer economics were represented frequently. Also included on some food policy teaching teams were people from animal science, dairy science, plant pathology, entomology, poultry science, bio-chemistry, political science, natural resources, allied medical science, communications, and 4-H. Public policy educators were usually the team leader, though in a few cases people from the field of marketing or home economics acted as the coordinator.

Nutrition policy education work will require interdisciplinary teaching teams, because no one discipline has the scientific expertise, nor the knowledge, nor the skills to conduct Extension nutrition policy education programs effectively with our audiences. Educators will need to be as objective as possible in their analyses and let the "chips fall" where they may. If you act as a farm advocate, your credibility with farmers and businessmen will be negated. If you show a strong bias toward agribusiness, you will be doubted by both farmers and consumers.

Reaching a new audience should be an achievement with an effective Extension program on nutrition policy choices. For example, a study in one statewide Extension educational effort on the Your Food program showed that over 50% of the audience had not previously attended an Extension meeting. They were frequently urban and representing groups newly interested in food issues, like ministers, hunger task force representatives, university staff, and other community leaders.

In my judgment, policy educators should help initiate and conduct Extension nutrition policy programs in cooperation with other disciplines. It is not easy, but the merits or benefits exceed the pain or costs. If we do not assist in development of nutrition policy education, someone else will. And it might not be as objective or effective as desired and could reflect adversely upon your university.

An Interim Activity

In the interim and until educational materials on nutrition policy are available, each of us might conduct some educational work on the policymaking process. Formerly, the congressional farm bloc (mostly Southern and Midwest interests) determined what happened in the political arena. The results were farm policy. It was supply side and farm price and income oriented.

That is no longer the case. Today we have concerns about food safety, additives, nutrition, etc. This is demand side oriented with hunger issues, malnutrition, food stamps, food safety, and food prices coming to the fore. This portion is food policy. The combined result is farm and food policy.

And today we have a lot of “new actors” in the political process. The policy agenda has changed. And farmers do not fully comprehend that agriculture no longer controls the agenda. There are many new and unfamiliar people and groups in the decision making process.

Given the “old” perceptions of policy making among most citizens, there is need to conduct an educational program on the new agenda and the modern policy making process.

PART II

Policy Options for Small Farms

